



George Washington Stood Here... On the Issue of Slavery

Intended Grade Level: High School

Lesson Purpose: To examine George Washington's dichotomous role as a man who fought for and led our country in the belief that "all men are created equal" and as a man who owned slaves.

Lesson Objectives:

- To understand the societal, cultural, and economic conditions in 18th century American life that sustained the institution of slavery.
- To examine the 18th century enslaved community at Mount Vernon.
- To explore the relationship between George Washington and his slaves.

National Standards:

NSS-USH.5-12.2 ERA 2: COLONIZATION AND SETTLEMENT (1585-1763)

- Understands why the Americas attracted Europeans, why they brought enslaved Africans to their colonies, and how Europeans struggled for control of North America and the Caribbean
- Understands how political, religious, and social institutions emerged in the English colonies
- Understands how the values and institutions of European economic life took root in the colonies, and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas

NSS-C.9-12.3 PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?

- How are power and responsibility distributed, shared, and limited in the government established by the United States Constitution?
- How is the national government organized and what does it do?
- How are state and local governments organized and what do they do?
- What is the place of law in the American constitutional system?
- How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

NL-ENG.K-12.1 READING FOR PERSPECTIVE

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the



needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

NL-ENG.K-12.3 EVALUATION STRATEGIES

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Background:

George Washington inherited his first ten slaves at age 11 upon the death of his father. By the time of Washington's death in 1799, there were 316 slaves on the Mount Vernon property, of which 123 were Washington slaves and 153 were dower slaves belonging to Martha Washington's estate. Washington also rented about 40 slaves from a neighbor. The slaves worked and lived on 5 separate farms, with the majority working and living on the plantation's four agriculture farms. Most of the agricultural field workers were women. Of the nearly 90 slaves who lived on the Mansion House farm, which was the seat of the plantation, only about 60 were of working age. The vast majority of the working-age slaves at Mansion House farm were skilled artisans or craftsmen, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, spinners, etc. About 42% of the total Mount Vernon slave population did not work because they were either children, elderly, or infirm.

The Virginia planter class of the 18th century considered slaves essential to the survival of their plantations. An exacting taskmaster, George Washington expected the Mount Vernon slaves to work hard and produce much. He was often disappointed. He tried both reward and punishment to induce compliance. However, there was no real incentive for slaves to work harder. Slaves resisted slavery through a variety of means from working slowly (or not at all), to theft or breaking of tools, to running away. Slaves were required to work from sunrise to sunset, which could equal a 15 hour workday in the summers, and worked every day of the week except Sunday.

Over the years, many Washington slaves married dower slaves, who were entailed to the estate of Mrs. Washington's first husband. Although Mrs. Washington had the legal use of these slaves during her lifetime, by law, she could not free them. At her death, dower slaves would legally revert to the Custis estate. This meant that when George Washington emancipated his slaves, their freedom would inevitably separate families. Washington made the provision in his will, which he wrote the summer



before his death, to immediately free his former manservant, Billy Lee, and the remainder of his slaves upon the death of his wife. Mrs. Washington did not wait until her death in 1802; instead she freed all of Washington's slaves on January 1, 1801. George Washington never publicly spoke out against slavery but certainly set an example he hoped others would follow. Of the nine American presidents who were slave owners, Washington was the only one to free his slaves.

Timeframe: Approximately one class session

Procedure:

1. Discuss as a class why primary documents are important for studying history and introduce students to the Document Analysis Worksheets (DAW) of the National Archives, <http://archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/index.html>.
2. Students will examine the Transcription: Advertisement for Runaway Slaves (included below) with the DAW and answer the following questions:
 - What do the descriptions of the slaves indicate about their living conditions? Do the descriptions provide any personal glimpse into these men?
 - What do you think were George Washington's beliefs toward purchasing slaves at this time?
 - Why may the slaves have traveled to particular places upon escape?
 - After studying the description provided by Washington, is there any information that indicates all or some of the runaways may have had trouble blending into the general population?
3. Have students examine the Transcription: George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette and the Transcription: George Washington to John Francis Mercer, Sept. 9, 1786 (included below) with the DAW. Have students consider the following questions:
 - How long after the Revolutionary War were these letters written?
 - Why would Washington think a gradual plan to abolish the purchase of slaves preferable to immediate emancipation?



- What are some factors in Washington's life to this point that may have affected his views on slavery?
4. Have students examine the slave census from 1799 at The Digital Papers of George Washington website with the DAW and consider the following questions:
(<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/pgwde/dflt.xqy?keys=search-Ret04d353&hi=slaves>)
- What are some of the jobs that Mount Vernon slaves did?
 - How many of the slaves are either children or elderly?
 - The law required slave owners to house and feed slaves who were too young, old, or disabled to work. How might this have affected George Washington's opinion on slavery from an economic viewpoint?
5. Have students examine George Washington's Will using the DAW (included below) and answer the following questions:
- What do you think were George Washington's motives in freeing his slaves upon his wife's death?
 - How do you think the public perceived George Washington's Will?
 - What does the will indicate about his relationship with his slaves?
 - How has George Washington's will affected his legacy?
6. Conduct a class discussion on your student's perceptions of these documents. Ask students what was happening in the country at the time that each document was written. Students should come to a general consensus about the factors that may have affected George Washington's opinions on slavery by the end of his lifetime and his motives for freeing his slaves in his Will.



Adapted from a lesson plan by Beth Harding,

George Washington Teachers' Institute 2003



Transcription: Advertisement for Runaway Slaves posted by George Washington, August 11, 1761

Fairfax County (Virginia) August 11, 1761.

Ran away from a Plantation of the Subscriber's, on Dogue Run in Fairfax, on Sunday the 9th Instant, the following Negroes, viz.

Peros, 35 or 40 Years of Age, a well-set Fellow, of about 5 Feet 8 Inches high, yellowish Complexion, with a very full round Face, and full black Beard, his Speech is something slow and broken, but not in so great a Degree as to render him remarkable. He had on when he went away, a dark colour'd Cloth Coat, a white Linen Waistcoat, white Breeches and white Stockings.

Jack, 30 Years (or thereabouts) old, a slim, black, well made Fellow, of near 6 Feet high, a small Face, with Cuts down each Cheek, being his Country Marks, his Feet are large (or long) for 66 he requires a great Shoe: The Cloathing he went off in cannot be well ascertained, but it is thought in his common working Dress, such as Cotton Waistcoat (of which he had a new One) and Breeches, and Osnabrig Shirt.

Neptune, aged 25 or 30, well set, and of about 5 Feet 8 or 9 Inches high, thin jaw'd, his Teeth stragling and fil'd sharp, his Back, if rightly remember'd, has many small Marks or Dots running from both Shoulders down to his Waistband, and his Head was close shaved: Had on a Cotton Waistcoat, black or dark colour'd Breeches, and an Osnabrig Shirt.

Cupid, 23 or 25 Years old, a black well made Fellow, 5 Feet 8 or 9 Inches high, round and full faced, with broad Teeth before, the Skin of his Face is coarse, and inclined to be pimply, he has no other distinguishable Mark that can be recollected; he carried with him his common working Cloaths, and an old Osnabrigs Coat made Frockwise.

The two last of these Negroes were bought from an African Ship in August 1759, and talk very broken and unintelligible English; the second one, Jack, is Countryman to those, and speaks pretty good English, having been several Years in the Country. The other, Peros, speaks much better than either, indeed has little of his Country Dialect left, and is esteemed a sensible judicious Negro.

As they went off without the least Suspicion, Provocation, or Difference with any Body, or the least angry Word or Abuse from their Overseers, tis supposed they will hardly



GW

lurk about in the Neighbourhood, but steer some direct Course (which cannot even be guessed at) in Hopes of an Escape: Or, perhaps, as the Negro Peros has lived many Years about Williamsburg, and King William County, and Jack in Middlesex, they may possibly bend their Course to one of those Places.

Whoever apprehends the said Negroes, so that the Subscriber may readily get them, shall have, if taken up in this County, Forty Shillings Reward, beside what the Law allows; and if at any greater Distance, or out of the Colony, a proportionable Recompence paid them, by

George Washington

N.B. If they should be taken separately, the Reward will be proportioned.



Transcription: Excerpt from letter to the Marquis de Lafayette by George Washington, May 10, 1786

...The benevolence of your heart my Dr Marqs is so conspicuous upon all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an Estate in the Colony of Cayenne with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country, but I despair of seeing it – some petitions were presented to the Assembly at its last Session, for the abolition of slavery, but 44 they could scarcely obtain a reading. To set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience & mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, & assuredly ought to be effected & that too by Legislative authority.

I give you the trouble of a letter to the Marqs de St Simon, in which I have requested to be presented to Mr de Menonville. The favourable terms in which you speak of Mr Jefferson gives me great pleasure: he is a man of whom I early imbibed the highest opinion – I am as much pleased therefore to meet confirmations of my discernment in these matters, as I am mortified when I find myself mistaken.

I send herewith the copies of your private Letters to me, promised in my last, & which have been since copied by your old aid. As Mrs Washington & myself have both done ourselves the honor of writing to Madame de la Fayette, I shall not give you the trouble at this time of presenting my respects to her; but pray you to accept every good wish which this family can render for your health & every blessing this life can afford you. I cannot conclude without expressing to you the earnest enquiries & ardent wishes of your friends (among whom I claim to stand first) to see you in America, & of giving you repeated assurances of the sincerity of my friendship, & of the Affectionate regard with which I am &c. &c.

G: W – – n



Transcription: George Washington to John Francis Mercer, Sept. 9, 1786

Mount Vernon 9th Sep. 1786.

Dear Sir,

Your favor of the 20th ulto did not reach me till about the first inst. It found me in a fever, from which I am now but sufficiently recovered to attend to business. I mention this to shew that I had it not in my power to give an answer to your propositions sooner.

With respect to the first, I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by the legislature by which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptable degrees. With respect to the 2d, I never did, nor never intend to purchase a military certificate; I see no difference it makes with you (if it is one of the funds allotted for the discharge of my claim) who the purchaser is. If the depreciation is 3 for 1 only, you will have it in your power whilst you are at the receipt of Custom – Richmond – where it is said the great regulator of this business (Greaves) resides, to convert them into specie at that rate. If the difference is more, there would be no propriety, if I inclined to deal in them at all, in my taking them at that exchange.

I shall rely upon your promise of two hundred pounds in five weeks from the date of your letter. It will enable me to pay the workmen which have been employed abt this house all the Spring & Summer, (some of whom are here still). But there are two debts, which press hard upon me. One of which, if there is no other resource, I must sell Land or Negroes to discharge. It is owing to Govr Clinton of New York, who was so obliging as to borrow, & became my Security for £2500 to answer some calls 244 of mine. This sum was to be returned in twelve months from the conclusion of Peace. For the remains of it, about eight hundred pounds York C[urrenc]y I am now paying an interest of seven Pr Ct; but the high interest (tho' more than any estate can bear) I should not regard, if my credit was not at stake to comply with the conditions of the loan. The other debt, tho' I know the person to whom it is due wants it, and I am equally anxious to pay it, might be put off a while longer. This sum is larger than the other. I am Dr Sir
Yr Most Obedt Hble Servt



Transcription: Excerpt from George Washington's Will, July 9, 1799

Last Will and Testament
July 9, 1799

In the name of God amen

I GEORGE WASHINGTON of Mount Vernon, a citizen of the United States, and lately President of the same, do make, ordain and declare this Instrument; which is written with my own hand and every page thereof subscribed with my name, to be my last Will and Testament, revoking all others.

Imprimus. All my debts, of which there are but few, and none of magnitude, are to be punctually and speedily paid; and the Legacies hereinafter bequeathed, are to be discharged as soon as circumstances will permit, and in the manner directed.

Item. To my dearly beloved wife Martha Washington I give and bequeath the use, profit and benefit of my whole Estate, real and personal, for the term of her natural life; except such parts thereof as are specifically disposed of hereafter: My improved lot in the Town of Alexandria, situated on Pitt and Cameron Streets, I give to her and her heirs forever, as I also do my household and Kitchen furniture of every sort and kind, with the liquors and groceries which may be on hand at the time of my decease; to be used and disposed of as she may think proper.

Item. Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will and desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom. To emancipate them during her life, would, tho' earnestly wished by me, be attended with such insuperable difficulties on account of their intermixture by Marriages with the Dower Negroes, as to excite the most painful sensations, if not disagreeable consequences from the latter, while both descriptions are in the occupancy of the same Proprietor; it not being in my power, under the tenure by which the Dower Negroes are held, to manumit them. And whereas among those who will receive freedom according to this devise, there may be some, who from old age or bodily infirmities, and others who on account of their infancy, that will be unable to support themselves; it is my Will and desire that all who come under the first and second description shall be comfortably cloathed and fed by my heirs while they live; and that such of the latter description as have no parents living, or if living are unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the age of twenty five years; and in cases where no record can be produced, whereby their ages can be ascertained, the judgment of the Court upon its own view of the subject, shall be adequate and final. The Negroes thus



bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read and write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. And I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any presence whatsoever. And I do moreover most pointedly, and most solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that this clause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay, after the Crops which may then be on the ground are harvested, particularly as it respects the aged and infirm; Seeing that a regular and permanent fund be established for their Support so long as there are subjects requiring it; not trusting to the uncertain provision to be made by individuals. And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom; or if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which have befallen him, and which have rendered him incapable of walking or of any active employment) to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so: In either case however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life, which shall be independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he chuses the last alternative; but in full, with his freedom, if he prefers the first; and this I give him as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War. . . .